'Little Red Riding Hood': Rated R

The Grimms' tale offers children a front-row seat at the most compelling human scene

Private collection

Thomas Hart Benton*, Jessie and Jake, *1942

by CARL-HEINZ MALLET

FROM THE TOP SHELF OF HIS BOOKCASE, my uncle removed a worn brown volume, glanced at the book for an instant, smiled, then offered it to me. "This book," he said, "contains everything that anyone can know about children." The book was *Grimm's Fairy Tales,* the classic, age-old stories collected in the nineteenth century by the German folklorist Jacob Grimm and his brother Wilhelm.

That was in 1947, nearly forty years ago, when I was a young man just beginning a career as a schoolteacher. Since that day, I have been studying fairy tales, and the psychology of children as revealed through them. Following the advice of my uncle, who was a psychiatrist, I read the works of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Alfred Adler as guides to Grimm. For just as psychoanalytic principles can be employed to derive the underlying significance of a dream from its surface events, so those same principles can be used to extract the insights about children that are hidden in fairy tales.

Properly understood, psychoanalytic ideas are not formulas that can be applied with mathematical precision; they are too subtle. Nor are dreams and fairy tales equations to be solved; they are too complex. Every dream, every fairy tale, reveals, on analysis, layers of meaning. Different analysts may therefore offer different interpretations, each of which may be valid at some level. But while those disposed to look for deeper meanings in fairy tales may disagree about the meaning of a particular tale, they would probably agree about one general point, which is that the most fascinating characters are the children—Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, Strong Hans and Hans in Luck, Tom Thumb, and Rose-Red. Fairy-tale children love, suffer, and hate. They steal and lie. They are kind-hearted and self-sacrificing. They are selfish and jealous. They pursue their goals single-mindedly and always triumph in the end, whereupon their enemies die deliciously horrible deaths.

Take Little Red Riding Hood. The most striking thing about the child is that despite her extreme youth, she is very much a sexual being. The importance of this fact lies not in what it says about Red Riding Hood but in what it tells us about *all* children. Fairy tales are about people in general—which is one reason for their popularity; at the level of the unconscious, readers recognize themselves in the characters. The principal insights to be gained from "Little Red Riding Hood," then, are that children are very much interested in sex; know more about it, often, than their elders are prepared to recognize; and, at an early age, struggle with sexual wishes of their own. In the story of Little Red Riding Hood, behind a sweet, pure facade, nature dominates, and a primal life seethes.

Little Red Riding Hood first saw the literary light of day in 1697, when the story appeared in Paris, in Charles Perrault's famous collection of fairy tales. She is a very special kind of girl, and perhaps that is the reason her story is so well known, not only in France but in Germany, England, America, and other parts of the world. Adults everywhere enjoyed the story, for it is no mere children's tale; indeed, a number of its versions cannot be considered suitable for minors.

"Rotkäppchen" ("Little Red-Cap") is fairy tale number twenty-six in the Grimm collection. It begins, "Once upon a time there was a sweet little girl. Anyone who so much as looked at her loved her..." In the version by Ludwig Bechstein, another German folklorist, the first line runs, "Once there was an absolutely darling, charming little slip of a girl." It is highly unusual for a fairy-tale heroine to be called a "sweet girl" or a "charming little slip of a girl." Ordinarily, the girls in fairy tales are either thoroughly good or consummately bad, either beautiful (even "wondrously" beautiful), fair, and pious or ugly, dark, and wicked.

To readers, and to the many artists who have portrayed her—nicely combed hair, clean dress, neat stockings, and her little red hood on her pretty head—Little Red-Cap seems the epitome of innocence, friendliness, and helpfulness. For the past 150 years, she has been Germany's favorite little girl, capturing the hearts of children and adults alike. In England, Charles Dickens was so entranced with her that he remembered her as "my first love" and said he would have liked to make her his wife.

The wolf is entranced too, but his intentions are scarcely honorable. In the blatantly sexual imagery of Bechstein, he thinks, "Oh, you dearest, appetizing little hazelnut, you—I have to crack you." That is the special thing about this fairy tale: its innocent heroine arouses openly sexual desires. In other fairy tales, sexuality flourishes only cryptically. But in "Little Red Riding Hood," it is almost impossible to see the wolf's wishes as harmless or to overlook the heroine's sex appeal. The story lays great stress on the emblem that gives the child her name: the red hood. "The child looked extremely pretty in the hood, and the little girl knew it," Bechstein writes. Red Riding Hood is fully aware of the "signaling" effect of her red hood. She loves it so much that she wants to wear nothing else, say Bechstein and the brothers Grimm, and if we were to take this statement literally, the child would have on nothing but her red hood. This fits in with the impression that the heroine makes, for it is not by chance that the wolf wants to "snap her up." And something must have induced Dickens to say that Red Riding Hood brought him "perfect bliss." For all her innocence, Little Red Riding Hood turns men on.

Coquetry in childhood is not innate. Fathers provoke

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Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. John Fiske

Gustave Doré (1832–83), detail of Red Riding Hood and the wolf from **Les Contes de Perrault**

it, because they are attracted to their little daughters, and some mothers also foster it. Most girls enjoy the role of little vamp if offered it. The second line of the fairy tale reveals who offers Little Red Riding Hood this part. It is her grandmother, who gives the child the red velvet cape. Undoubtedly, the grandmother is a key figure in the plot. Yet we learn little about her—she does not seem like a complete person, and for good reason.

In fairy tales as in dreams, two ostensibly different characters may actually represent one person. For instance, a dreamer may appear as himself in his own dream, along with another character who stands for just one part of his personality, often a part he does not like. That is the case in "Little Red Riding Hood." The "grandmother" is not really that, but only an aspect of the mother—the part of her that longs for exciting sexual experiences. The division of the mother's personality between two characters reveals the conflict within her. One part of her is worried about her daughter and is afraid that something will happen to her in the woods. Another part wants this very thing for herself. Her husband, who, in the role of huntsman, appears only once, very briefly, in the story, seems to play only a small role in her life as well. He has a rifle but does not use it.

Red Riding Hood's mother is lonely and would like to be "picked up" and courted, just as her daughter is in the course of the story; she would like to hear lovely compliments and receive a visit in a secluded house far from her village. Some people might consider such wishes taboo, which is why they are ascribed to a grandmother, a figure generally perceived as beyond reproach. The fact that the mother's wishes do not meet community standards explains why the grandmother lives far from the village, in an area to which pariahs are sometimes exiled. Her activities there remain secret. No one knows that she enjoys wine and cake—symbols, perhaps, of bodily pleasures—and fails to keep her door locked.

Indirectly, Red Riding Hood's mother satisfies some of her sexual needs in the character of the grandmother. But, in addition, the mother seeks vicarious fulfillment through her daughter, with whom she identifies herself. The mother dares not seek out the wolf for herself, much as she might like to, and so dresses her daughter attractively and sends her out into the forest, the home of the wicked wolf. Simultaneously innocent and sexy, the child will exert a powerful attraction; the wolf will not stop at voicing polite compliments, and the mother knows it.

Naturally, the mother is not aware of her motivation, since it is unconscious. The part of her that is a good mother wants to warn her daughter of the danger the girl faces. But like so many real mothers, she does not enlighten the child about the character and intentions of the wolf; she does not even dare pronounce the word "wolf." Her advice to Red Riding Hood is disguised: "Walk decently and do not leave the path, or you will fall and break the glass." Ostensibly, "the glass" refers to the container holding a gift of wine for the grandmother. But the real meaning of the mother's warning is, stay on the right path, or you'll lose your innocence and be a fallen girl.

At one level, Red Riding Hood probably has no precise notion of what her mother means. But at a deeper, unconscious level, she certainly senses the nature of the danger and can understand the two conflicting messages: the one expressed in words, to "walk decently" and stay

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Gustave Doré,* In the Wood Little Red Riding Hood Met Old Father Wolf, *1867

out of trouble, and the underlying, unspoken message, to go out and seduce the wolf for her mother's vicarious pleasure. Dutifully, Red Riding Hood promises to obey her mother's admonition and behave circumspectly. She even offers her mother her hand in an ostentatious gesture of compliance intended to lend weight to the promise. But a moment later—again dutifully, because she is now responding to her mother's unconscious wishes—she forgets her promise.

When Red Riding Hood meets the wolf, he says courteously, "Good day, Little Red Riding Hood." Amiably, and unafraid, she returns his greeting and says, "Thank you, *wolf*." She actually knows the wicked animal's name, a reminder that in real life parents who cudgel their brains—"How shall I tell my child?"—often come to realize that the "innocent" little daughter or son is already well informed.

The wolf's politeness is nothing but a strategy. No sooner have the two exchanged civilities than he asks bluntly, "What are you carrying under your apron?" It is quite obvious that the basket of cake and wine is not hidden; the little girl is carrying it on her arm. In any case, the wolf's interest is not in the basket or its contents but in the little girl's body; like a small boy, he wants a look at it. But Red Riding Hood does not react to his hint. In the Grimm version of the tale, she fails to hear the question, responding instead to his first query, about where she is going: "Grandmother is sick and weak, so I am taking her cake and wine; we did our baking yesterday."

Does Red Riding Hood catch his drift? She must; otherwise, she would have asked him what he meant or would have replied naïvely, "I have a dress under my apron." She is playing innocent, as the Bechstein version hints. "You must be a doctor," she tells the wolf, suggesting that she knows he would like to "play doctor," as so many real little boys and girls enjoy doing. But in the fairy tale, there is no game; playing doctor is taboo. The moral is obvious: everything having to do with sex is wicked.

What happens in the story is less innocent than the mutual exhibitionism that often occurs among real-life children. First, Red Riding Hood gives the wolf precise directions to Grandmother's: "Her house is under the three big oak trees. The nut hedges are below." Casually she adds, "You must know that." Apparently, she knows that the wolf often visits Grandmother's house, and her awareness can be interpreted as meaning that she knows the secret of her parents' sexual life. At this moment in the story, the wolf represents Red Riding Hood's father, but the animal's symbolic significance shifts rapidly. At some times, he is an adult seducer; at others, he is a small boy with a childish sexual curiosity about little girls.

As the narrative continues, the wolf suddenly says, "You do not even hear the little birds singing so sweetly. You walk along as if you were going to school, and it is so delightful out in the woods." So Little Red Riding Hood runs merrily into the forbidden forest and picks a huge bouquet for her grandmother.

Abandoned, the wolf has to do without the "tender young thing" for now. He reflects that she would taste a lot better than the grandmother, but decides to make do and heads straight for the grandmother's house. He thinks of her as *die Alte,* which means "old woman" and is frequently employed by German men to refer to their wives. The use of that expression hints that perhaps a conjugal scene is about to take place, a scene in which the wolf now stands for Red Riding Hood's father, and the grandmother, as usual, for the child's mother. A number of clues point in this direction. The wolf knocks and is welcomed, which suggests that *die Alte* knows and expects him. His masquerade as Little Red Riding Hood need not invalidate this interpretation; it disguises not the wolf's identity but the sexual content of the encounter that is about to occur.

In the Grimm version, the grandmother responds to his knocking with the words "Just turn the knob." In Bechstein, the sexual imagery is a bit more transparent. "Reach down through the hole in the door, that's where the key is," the grandmother says. Thereupon the wolf enters and without uttering a word goes over to the bed and swallows the woman whole. Eating here represents intercourse, which fits in with the notions of many children, who do not know precisely what happens between parents in bed but often associate sex with violence. One important detail: the wolf's abruptness helps to confirm his identity as a husband; such loveless, mechanical sex is to be expected only of a man who has been married to his partner for a long time.

For our heroine, another narrative detail in this scene is also important: the door remains open. Both the brothers Grimm and Bechstein explicitly mention this fact, and both versions depict Little Red Riding Hood as much surprised: "Normally," Bechstein says, "the grandmother prefers to keep herself under lock and bolt." The interpretation is easy. Parents usually lock or at least close their bedroom door to make sure that children do not intrude on their intimate times together.

When Red Riding Hood enters the cottage and says good morning, she receives no answer, and according to Grimm she thinks, "My goodness, how frightened I feel today." Bechstein writes in the same vein: "Her young little heart felt very frightened." Yet instead of fleeing, she goes to the bed and pulls back the curtain. Moving closer, she finds her "grandmother" changed in an almost eerie, intimidating way, her image bizarrely mingled with that of the wolf. Red Riding Hood is amazed at what she sees, and comments, "Why, Grandmother, what big ears you have!" And then, in the same way, she remarks on her grandmother's eyes, hands, and mouth.

The organs of which Red Riding Hood speaks not only stand for the part of the father's anatomy that most intrigues his daughter, his penis, but also have additional psychological significance. Children have "big ears" when they try to hear something that they are not supposed to hear, and when they find out anything about their parents' love life, it is usually with their ears. Less frequent is the opportunity to have "big eyes" and actually to see the secret of sex instead of just listening to it. Few real children ever witness the "primal scene"—their parents engaged in sex—at such close range as the heroine of our fairy tale. Hence, perhaps, the extraordinary popularity of "Little Red Riding Hood." Not even the most graphic book or movie could outdo the sensuous scene in the grandmother's bed; the impact of the sym-

bols employed, communicating as they do with the unconscious, is surely more powerful than any literal depiction could be. And the figure of Red Riding Hood at the bedside has tremendous appeal, for reasons of which readers are probably unaware. The child has the opportunity of getting to the bottom of the most mysterious thing in the world. She does not look away, she does not repress, and she is not ashamed. She pulls aside the curtain and stares, and all curious children can look over her shoulder and experience with her all the secret things that are going on. Little Red Riding Hood offers every child a front-row seat at the most compelling human scene.

"Why, Grandmother, what big eyes you have," says the little girl.

"The better to see you with," the wolf answers.

Even stranger are the large, hirsute hands, at which she also marvels aloud. "The better to grab you with," the wolf answers in the brothers Grimm. "The better to grab you and hold you with," he says in Bechstein. "The better to embrace you," he tells her in the French version.

Excitement mounts as each new organ is added to the catalog of symbols. When Red Riding Hood gets to the last, most disconcerting organ, she does not begin, "Why, Grandmother," as before, but says, "But, Grandmother, what a dreadfully big mouth you have!" Previously so self-assured, the girl is knocked off balance by this dreadfully big thing. But still she does not run away. "The better to eat you with," she hears, and then the wolf devours her. He has "sated his lust," we learn from Grimm, and he turns over, falls asleep, and snores.

So this is what happens, Red Riding Hood may think to herself. But a little girl cannot really understand. The French version, often more explicit than other versions, speaks of the *petite mort*—literally, "little death"; figuratively, "orgasm"—that Red Riding Hood experiences. It plunges her into profound darkness; she experiences something that she cannot understand.

The moralists can now rub their hands and smugly gloat: "That's what she gets. If she had obeyed her mother, nothing would have happened to her." In fact, the fairy tale raises a troubling issue. Indirectly, it advocates highly inappropriate conduct for children. Little Red Riding Hood, with whom young readers naturally identify themselves, disobeys, launches into morally dubious adventures, and displays a totally unsuitable curiosity.

Needless to say, no fairy tale can let her get away with it. If it did, no adult would ever tell the story to a child, for who would dig a grave for his own authority? Hence, the story shows unequivocally that the heroine's misdeeds lead to disaster. By way of punishment and as a deterrent to others, the little girl is eaten by the wolf. This is where the French version ends, presumably convincing children that bad behavior is folly.

But in all other versions, the heroine is saved. In Bechstein, for instance, she quickly escapes from the wolf's belly and utters a friendly "Good morning." But lest any child be tempted to follow Red Riding Hood's example, the fairy tale has her regret her misconduct and vow never to disobey her mother again. It also makes clear that the wolf, with whom she has chatted so amiably and flirted so self-confidently, now seems wicked in her eyes. She has returned, psychologically, to her mother's protection and standards, and she is safe once again. The huntsman, Red Riding Hood's father, skins the "old sinner." Then, all three of them are delighted. Together, father, mother (in the guise of grandmother), and child drink the wine, eat the cake, and rejoice in being, once more, a quiet, conventional, happy family. ■

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Mary Cassatt*, Mrs. Cassatt Reading to Her Grandchildren, *1880